

FLUTE BASICS

Kim S. McCormick, D.M. A.

Associate Professor of Flute, The University of South Florida

kmccormi@arts.usf.edu

PUTTING THE FLUTE TOGETHER

The embouchure hole can be aligned with the keys or with the far outside edge (strike edge) aligned with the edge of the first key. (C# key). The second is the preferred method. The rod on the foot joint should be aligned with the center of the bottom key on the main body. When assembling, be careful not to grip the keys. Instead grip the barrel and the bottom of the foot joint.

HOLDING THE FLUTE

There will be four points of contact. 1.) The base of the knuckle of the first finger in the left hand. 2.) The right hand thumb. 3.) The pinky of the right hand. This key is down for most fingerings on the flute. 4.) The chin.

In the right hand, it is important that the thumb be placed between the index and second fingers. It should never protrude beyond the “edge” of the flute. The head should be tilted slightly to the right; however it is important that the flute be parallel to the lips. Hold the flute directly in front of the chest while looking to the left. With the arms placed in front of the sternum, allow the left elbow to fall beside the rib cage while slightly raising the right elbow. Raise the flute with the wrists allowing the left wrist to bend. The right wrist should be straight. Fingers must be curved and relaxed. The left thumb can be curved or held straight.

EMBOUCHURE

Create a small rounded aperture between the lips that focuses the air at a slight downward angle. The air stream should be directed at the outer edge of the hole, with about 60% of the air going down into the flute. The corners of the lips should be gently firm as if saying the word “pure”. Notice that the top lip pulls the air stream downward. Using a coffee stirrer to blow through can be very beneficial. It allows the student to feel the lips gripping the invisible “air reed”. The student will observe which muscles are working to form the embouchure.

It is very helpful if whistle tones are introduced at the very beginning. They will naturally produce a forward embouchure and will allow flexibility later on for wide interval slurs. (See page on whistle tones).

SOME COMMON EMOUCHURE PROBLEMS

- 1.) An embouchure which looks like a smile. Solution: push the corners forward as if saying “pure”. Practice whistle tones. Over time, the student will learn to form a more natural embouchure.
- 2.) The embouchure plate is too high on the bottom lip. Do not teach the “kiss and roll” method. This places the lip plate too high and limits the volume, flexibility of the lips and quality of the tone. Solution: have the student bring the flute from up under the lips. It should fit into the curve between the chin and the bottom lip.
- 3.) An aperture that is too large. Solution: Use the coffee straw to illustrate the shape, and also the correct size of the opening.
- 4.) The oral cavity is too closed. The space between the teeth should be about the same as the distance between the teeth when the index finger is placed between the teeth. Solution: Use the index finger as a reminder of the distance. Remind the student to “drop the jaw”. This will improve tone quality and greatly improve intonation problems.
- 5.) The off- set embouchure, also known as the “tear-drop” or “cupid’s bow” embouchure. This is included but is actually not a problem at all once the student learns to shift the opening off to the left of center. Some famous flutists have had to deal with this. Rampal was a notable example.

BREATHING/PHRASING

Students must learn to drop the jaw when taking a breath. If the student is not allowed to raise the head or shoulders, the breath will be deep. Practice quick deep breaths by playing scales in short notes with a breath following each note. The air stream must be fast.

POSTURE

Standing posture: Align the upper body directly with the hips and feet. Look to the left and position the flute in front of the sternum. The end of flute will be pushed away from the body. Keep the shoulders down and head up. Bring the flute to the body. Do not lean into the music stand.

Sitting: Sit upright with the back completely against the back of the chair. Again, push the end of the flute out and away from the body.

ARTICULATION

Single Tongue

The tip of the tongue normally touches at or slightly behind the gum line. There are times however when the tongue may actually come between the teeth. A soft attack can also be started with a breath attack or a lip attack. Release the air with the tip of the tongue

immediately after the breath. Rest the tip of the tongue forward in the mouth after the release.

Double Tongue

The goal is to match the back-tongue (ku or goo) with the forward attack. Try to keep the two as far forward as comfortable. It is important that the back attack not be placed in the back of the throat, but as close to the tu or du as possible. (See **Articulation** sheet).

VIBRATO

Strive to create a smooth even variation above and below the pitch. Practice slowly with triplets at MM=60. Gradually increase the speed to MM= 120 for the quarter note, pulsing in triplets.

TECHNIQUE

Practice scales and arpeggios single tongued, double tongued and in triple tongue.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Airy, fuzzy tone: Create a smaller embouchure by pushing the lips forward and pulling the top lip down.

Flat pitch, covered tone: Roll the flute out. Make sure the flute is not too high on the bottom lip. It should be under the bottom lip.

Tone is sharp and thin: Focus the air more downward and make sure there is a space between the teeth.

Tone is weak and has limited dynamic range: Use more air, keep the teeth apart. For soft playing and diminuendo, push the corners forward.

Articulation is delayed: Keep the tongue forward in the mouth. Make a smaller aperture. Push the corners forward; bring the top lip more downward.

Breathing is noisy and not deep: Do not move the head or shoulders up when breathing. Lower the jaw when taking the breath.

Technique is slow or uneven: Keep the fingers curved and close to the keys. Make sure the flute is balanced properly using the four balance points.

Hands and wrists hurt, or become cramped: Make sure the wrist is curved under the left hand. Be sure the fingers are curved. Make sure the right wrist is straight. Make sure the right hand thumb does not protrude beyond the “edge” of the flute.

The Flutist's Five Functional Phrases



ROLL OUT

PUSH the
CORNERS
FORWARD

PULL the TOP
LIP Down

DROP the JAW

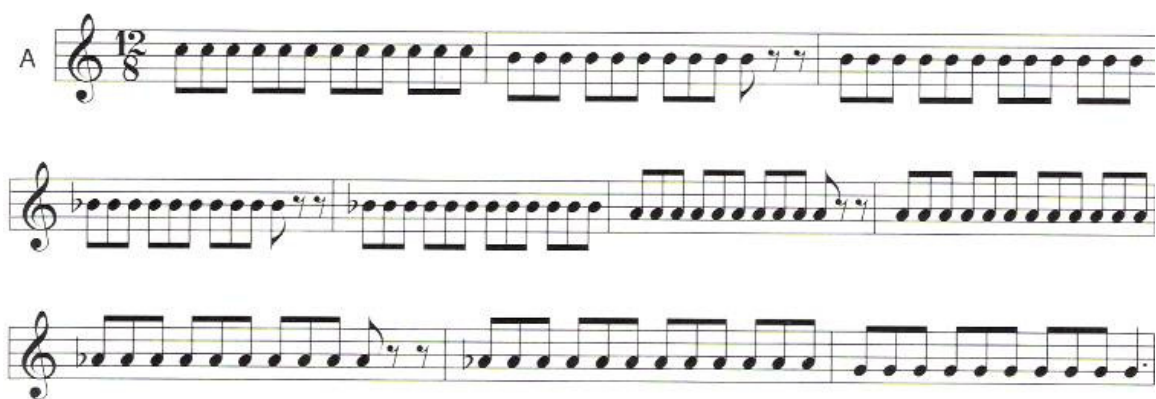
BLOW!

Vibrato Exercise

This exercise begins as separated notes at a slow speed (dotted-quarter = 60). Pulses should be separate attacks (no tongue) and will feel like a whistle inside the mouth and throat. Be careful not to force the sound! Practice at a mezzo-forte dynamic level.

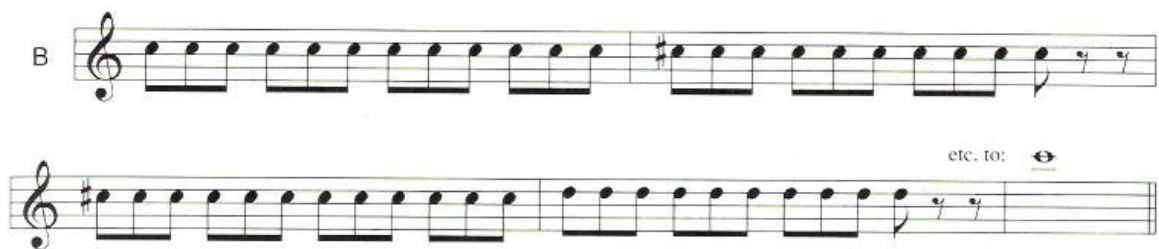
As you gradually build control and then speed, pulses will naturally run together around dotted-quarter = 76-80. The final goal is dotted-quarter = 112 to 120.

A



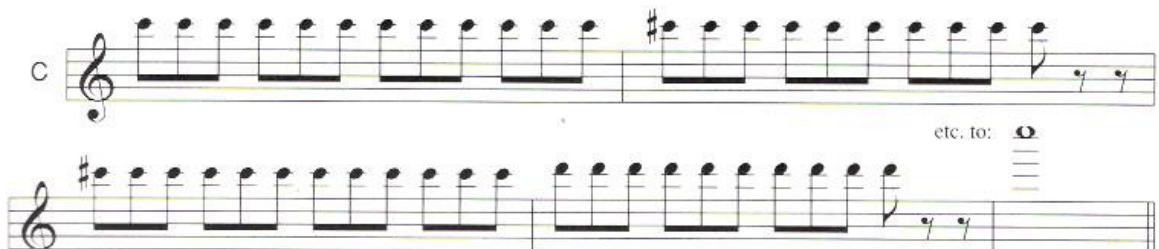
After mastering this register, begin at C and ascend chromatically (exercise B).

B



After mastering this register, begin at C, ascending chromatically, developing the upper register.

C



ERROR: stackunderflow
OFFENDING COMMAND: ~

STACK: